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Generative experiences and the desire to become generative: a biographical approach to the self-conceptualizations of a young former delinquent in Switzerland

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Abstract: The chapter focuses on the interplay between generativity and desistance. Based on four longitudinal interviews with a young man, who was convicted of a criminal offence and placed in a measure centre for young delinquents for four years, his biographical experiences during his placement and after his release are analysed. The first interview took place at the end of the placement, the others every 1.5 years. The interpretations of his narratives focus on how psychosocial conflict dynamics of socially marginalized adolescents intertwine with societal developmental demands. What significance do relationships with generationally others, whether parents, professionals or other adults, have for the development of his own generative attitude? It is shown that the different biographical relationship experiences are a decisive prerequisite for one's own ideas about relationships. However, they are also always dependent on supporting structures, in which conflicts also find room for productive processing.

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Generative Experiences and the Desire to Become Generative: A Biographical Approach to the Self-Conceptualizations of a Young Former Delinquent in Switzerland¹

Franz Zahradnik

1. Introduction

The interplay of desistance and generativity has been introduced as a vital component in the analysis of reintegration processes of ex-offenders (*Maruna* 2001; *McNeill & Maruna* 2008; *Healy & O'Donnell* 2008). As a factor promoting desistance, generativity has often been bound to the wider context of maturation or the birth of a child and the changing perspective through becoming a caring partner and parent (*Walker* 2010). With references to *Erik H. Erikson's* developmental theory, the origins of establishing a generative stance in childhood and adolescence through the self-experience of intergenerational assistance and guidance also gained some attention (*Halsey & Deegan* 2015, pp. 6–7; *Halsey & Harris* 2011, pp. 74–76; *McNeill & Maruna* 2008, pp. 225, 231). These connections can be worked out in more detail and should be embedded in a biographical perspective.

In this article, I focus on the experiences of male adolescents who have been placed in a so-called *Massnahmenzentrum* for young adults in Switzerland. In the eyes of the law, these young men are neither juveniles nor full adults. For those who are eighteen but not yet twenty-five years old, there are special measures they can be assigned to instead of imprisonment. These institutions aim at providing educational and vocational support so as to enable those young men to an autonomous and self-responsible lifestyle. Therefore, the duration of their stay is not determined by the offence committed but by the ascertained educational needs (*Aebbersold* 2011, p. 87; *Baechtold* 2009, pp. 275–277).

Compared with prison, those measures could be described as semi-closed community homes that are not enclosed by walls and fences but have a deeply structured overall concept and strict daily routines. One of the main goals is to accomplish a professional qualification, which is also the reason for the duration of the stay to last for up to four years (*Baechtold* 2009, p. 255). Complementarily, the young men must be actively involved in social work and psychotherapeutic treatment. As they prove

¹ I have to thank *Daniel Werner* for his helpful comments and redactional work. His engagement was essential for completing this text.

themselves during the measure, control mechanisms are reduced and the transition into the outside world is initialized (Studer 2013, pp. 203–209; see also Müller & Rossi 2009).

Recent studies scrutinize the adolescent strife for an autonomous and self-responsible lifestyle under the conditions of juvenile correctional facilities (Cox 2011; Reich 2010). It is argued that there are conflicts between the pedagogical intentions of the institution and the young men's subjective interpretations as well as coping strategies that transform or hinder processes of self-realization: "There were pains that lay in the 'split' between what the programme dictated as appropriate for progress, and how the process of change and growth were actually experienced" (Cox 2011, p. 593). These "paradoxes of treatment" (Abrams *et al.* 2005, p. 19) help broaden the perspective and take the psycho-social dynamics into account that are intertwined with the wider integration conflicts of socially marginalized adolescents (Bereswill 2004, p. 316). This opens the view for the conflict-ridden processes of evolving a generative stance that is hardly being achieved by changing short-term interventions but more likely through the offering of intergenerational relationships with a certain quality and continuity. Exploring the long-term consequences of the described institutional intervention requires an integrated perspective that allows the contextualization of the contradictory and tense situation in a semi-closed "environment into the biographical processes *before, during and after*" (Bereswill 2011, p. 216, emphasis in original) confinement.

In the following sections, I will first outline the theoretical framework that guides my analysis as a sensitizing concept (2). After presenting an overview of our qualitative longitudinal study (3), I analyze the biographical experiences of one young man who was placed in a *Massnahmезentrum* for four years (4). In the concluding section, I summarize my results and give an outlook of the upcoming challenges by further analyzing the biographical processes of becoming generative and overcoming delinquent behavior.

2. The Triad of Generativity – Adolescence – Desistance

Desistance research provides some instructive insights when conceptualizing the thematic complex of adolescence, generativity, and the emergence of a transformed self-image that is marked by the rejection of former criminal attitudes:

[D]esistance is a process associated with maturation but often characterised by ambivalence and vacillation; that it may be provoked by life events, depending on the meaning of these events for the offenders; that it may be 'sponsored' by someone involved in a significant relationship with the offender who 'believes in' the offender; that it probably involves more than the development of cognitive skills – it involves the re-storying of narrative identities; and that it requires the development of social as well as human capital (McNeill & Maruna 2008, p. 231).

A limitation of this view can be seen in the circumstance that it only allows access to the wider developmental process at a relatively late point in time analytically, namely when the progression towards desistance has started. The emphasis here is on what must be added to the offender's prevailing conditions – meaningful life events, significant relationships, the development of cognitive and narrative skills plus social and human capital. These are important insights, but the focus is apparently on the coping strategies and efforts concerning current and future identity management. This gives rise to the question what the biographical origins and developmental dynamics of generative pursuits could be. To put it another way: Are the chances and capabilities for becoming generative distributed equally?

It seems that the perspective needs to be broadened through a biographical approach to disentangle the life-course dynamics of evolving individual resources, because this gives access to the predecessors of the ability to become generative by oneself. This does not mean to conceptualize the biographical process as a linear chronology of subsequent developmental steps, but to take the hint of *Fergus McNeill* and *Shadd Maruna* (2008, p. 231) seriously that maturation is interspersed by “ambivalence and vacillation”. It is therefore necessary to present a theoretical framework that pays attention to the conflict-ridden psychodynamics of adolescent individuation.

The theory of adolescence presented by *Vera King* (2013) provides the conceptual framework for approaching these challenges on the way to adulthood. The phase of adolescence can then be seen as a “psychosocial realm of possibilities” (*King* 2013, p. 39) that is marked by various types of tensions and conflicts. A special emphasis is put on the ambivalences between autonomy and dependence, closeness and distance, attachment and separation, desires and normative adjustments – processes of individuation are conceived as dialectically bound to generativity (see also *Lüscher* 2011, pp. 193–194). In this sense, young people can benefit from a generative attitude of the adult generation and a moratorium provided by them potentially. This quality is characterized by different combinations of generational support and restraint, distinction, and availability. This applies to both the private sphere and institutional social work contexts (*King* 2012, p. 70). The psychosocial realm of possibilities is not an unlimited sphere to gain autonomy; instead, it is marked by specific scopes and restrictions for development. Thus, chances are not distributed equally; they rather depend on the objective “structure of opportunities” (*King* 2013, p. 43; *Bereswill* 2004, p. 318).

In the remarkable study of *Mark Halsey* and *Simone Deegan* about the struggles of young offenders for desistance, generativity is set as the central category of analysis. Following *Erik H. Erikson*, they state that he conceives generativity as a particular developmental stage that entails “a widening commitment to take care of the persons, the products, and the ideas one has *learned* to care for” (*Erikson* 1982, p. 67; cited in: *Halsey & Deegan* 2015, p. 6, emphasis added). The reference to learning is important for thinking about becoming generative because it clarifies that the offenders' generative history should be considered more systematically.

One specialty of adolescence is that it contains the potential of a “second chance” (*Erdheim* 1982). This means that young people can gain a new perspective on their childhood experiences and bring out something new. The course of this process is related to the above-mentioned quality of the adolescent realm of possibilities that is essentially shaped by the older generation. Becoming generative by oneself is part of this long-standing psychosocial reworking and also relies on stable as well as reliable relationships. When regarding pedagogical work in juvenile correctional facilities, this means that a learning environment has to be offered which to a certain degree also allows for stumbling and erring without immediate punishment and exclusion (*Cornel* 2011, p. 470). Moreover, the pivotal challenge of establishing a working bond in enforcement contexts already requires an appropriate amount of generative patience, especially in terms of holding an offer of support and assistance open, although the juvenile inmate is not yet capable or willing to join in (*Wigger* 2013, p. 158). Pedagogical generativity must bring together the tasks “to create transitional concepts and practices between being held tight and moving into more open spaces *within* institutions of social control” (*Bereswill* 2004, p. 332, emphasis in original) so as to give adolescents a sphere of action for working through their psychosocial conflicts.

Against the backdrop of this brief excursion concerning theoretical conceptualizations, I will follow *Halsey* and *Deegan* in asking whether “incarceration can be generative” (2015, p. 23) – but I will extend the question with the supplement: “and how this could be entangled within the wider biographical context.”

3. Study Design

The qualitative-longitudinal study “Ways out of Delinquency – Reintegration of Convicted Offenders in Switzerland” is led by *Peter Rieker* and financially supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. In the first survey wave in 2013 and 2014, fifty in-depth interviews were conducted with male offenders aged between 16 and 61. The offences committed ranged from petty to capital crime, so the men faced different forms and lengths of penal interventions. Most of the interviews were conducted at the end of an institutional placement, i.e. at the end of a prison sentence or placement in a juvenile facility. Up to now, we were able to interview forty of the men again about one and a half years later, and we are now conducting the third interview wave – the young man in the case example named *Noah Wyss* is one of those who have been interviewed consistently.

Our focus lies on understanding and working out biographical patterns of self-interpretation and coping strategies with a special interest in transition phases (*Walther & Stauber* 2013). In order to get subject-oriented access to those transitional challenges, we chose semi-structured interviews that are open to both wider problem constellations and individual biographical concerns (*Witzel* 2000; *Rosenthal* 2008).

We organized the analysis of our data in several steps; in order to categorize all interviews, we drew on the coding procedures referring to Grounded Theory (*Strauss & Corbin* 1990). We found indications that generativity has the character of a dialectical process structure, which means that there is a connective link between the desire for becoming generative and having experienced generative care and companionship on one's own (*Zahradnik & Humm* 2016, p. 187). The case reconstruction presented in the next chapter is based on the sequential analysis of three subsequent interviews with a young man and aims at exploring deeper layers of sense-making (*Wernet* 2009) as well as the understanding (*Verstehen*) of "the latent meanings of subjective self-representations and social action" (*Bereswill* 2004, p. 319).

4. Case Example: Noah Wyss

Noah Wyss was 22 years old when interviewed for the first time in the summer of 2013. At that time, he had almost completed his vocational training and a four-year measure at a *Massnahmezentrum*. In the following, most parts of his narration have to be summarized, but at some point, his personal quotes will be fully included.

4.1 "I want to pass this on to guys like I was or like I am" – The Desire to Build on Generative Experiences

Before *Noah* was arrested for the first time and then placed in two custodial institutions, he had finished school and started job training. When he was 16, he became more interested in girls and parties and neglected his job training. After he was laid off, he got into conflicts with his father. The situation heated up and *Noah* moved out; he describes the situation as follows:

And then my father said: "If you don't want your job training, then you shouldn't wanna live here." Actually, he wanted to say: "Search for something new quickly. You shouldn't sit on your parents' thing." And I wanted to understand it the way that he wanted to throw me out, so I left. (I)

There are two things evident in this text passage. First, *Noah* expresses a lack of understanding for his juvenile perspective by his father whom he describes as a kind of authoritarian character, which could also be interpreted as a lack of generative stance. The second point is that he reframes his initial interpretation and provides it with a misunderstanding on his part. Being aware that this quote was made several years after the actual situation, it clarifies that his perspective has changed and that he tries to establish a more mature perspective concerning the conflict.

But in those days, he moved out and lived with a girl he had met through a friend. They became a couple, and while she was working, he was unemployed and did the housework. When she had to go to the hospital for a longer time, he felt lonely and began to drink more and more. He started stealing cars when drunk and got arrested.

He had to undergo a time-out for two months and was placed in a farmer family up in the mountains. This was a difficult experience for him because the farmer was like a “dictator” and mistreated not only the young inmates but still more his own family. *Noah*’s description of this time also indicates that he developed an idea of unacceptable limits in the constitution of social contact.

After eight more months in another juvenile institution, he got into trouble with his girlfriend. She left him, and he fell into a deep hole, repeating the old patterns of drinking a lot and stealing cars. At the same time, he did an internship as an early childhood educator – something he describes as fulfilling and making him “proud”. Finally, he was arrested again, and this time, he received a prison sentence which was later transformed into a four-year measure.

He describes the initial period in this measurement as restrictive and difficult to fit in. This changed when he began vocational training as a carpenter. In the opening passage of the first interview, he tells about his pleasure to work with wood enthusiastically. This personal connection to practical work is embedded in a wider intersubjective context in which he gains confidence and self-efficacy. His work-oriented narratives transport an abundance of passion which is accompanied by ambivalent experiences in his social-therapeutic treatment.

The relation with his main personal advisor is conflict-laden because *Noah* feels misunderstood when he has to talk about his former deviant behavior. He tries to give insights into his inner life, but the advisor always recurs to his own experiences, which *Noah* does not recognize as comparable and appropriate and therefore as not authentic. From his point of view, the advisor can only refer to books he has read but not to real life. In light of this conflicting experience in the spheres of work and social therapy, *Noah* describes work as a refuge that protects him from the awkward situations with his personal advisor. Later, he also got in touch with other advisors who better fitted his realm of biographical experiences:

One of the social workers was there as an inmate himself. And then, ehm, six years later, he came back and completed training and is a social worker now. And for me, I just want that people can take me seriously, and I know a lot of people here who say: “Why should I talk to a social worker who has no clue what’s going on with me?” [...] Having gone through something like this by yourself and then somebody tells you: “I have a bad crisis”, then I know exactly how to handle that. (I)

This is a key passage for the interpretation because both directions of generativity join hands. The experience of feeling understood by an authentic generative other sets in motion a transition into the active realization of the desire to become generative by oneself. This desire for being generative also extends into the sphere of work where *Noah* “fought” for the permission to teach younger trainees. He describes his motivation as follows:

On average, I work seven hours a day and they are my people there and I get along well with them. I can talk about every problem with them. And I'm grateful for what I got there, especially from them. And at some point, I want to pass this on to guys like I was or like I am. I want to put them on track through work because I learned carpenting by myself. (I)

Now a legitimate question is whether this development – that to a large part comes out of an institutionalized setting – can overcome the transition into the outside world.

4.2 “And now, for the first time, I am in the situation that I must find myself” – Unselfish Self-Care

As we can see in the second interview at the end of 2014, *Noah* did not go through a transition without disruptions and crises, but he made his way. Finding work with his training qualification and motivation was not a problem; he also changed his occupation twice before finding an employer he felt satisfied with. In addition, the desire to achieve further qualifications and to become a training instructor within the measure institution does still exist, even though the passion is slightly overshadowed by the realities of wage labor.

In the spheres of parents and romantic relationships, he underwent some tasks that point to the adolescence developmental process. Simultaneously, he actively worked on detaching himself from his parents. On the one side, he rejected their offer to move back in with them after being released because from his point of view, the current spatial distance brought a new kind of emotional closeness with it. On the other side, he burdened himself with a new set of dependencies when he moved in with his girlfriend and her mother. After some months, he felt constrained and broke off the relationship. He moved into another flat with a guy his age. He supports this step with the following reasons:

She begins to talk about family and kids and I say: Sorry, I was in an extreme situation before, then brought into another extreme in the *Massnahmezentrum*, and from that extreme to a further extreme to her and her mother. And now, for a start, I'm just me. And now, for the first time, I am in the situation that I must find myself. What do I want, how do I want to proceed? And the pressure I always was under, the kind of: “I must be a good boyfriend”, finally, everything I did was for her and not for me. For her and her mother. (II)

This passage shows that the extensive pressures of the measure and the subsequent dependencies *Noah* got entangled with activated his resources for increasing self-care. The separation from his partner is his chosen exit route that bears some potential for conflict. Although the above passage sounds a bit selfish, *Noah* represents himself in his ongoing narration as carefully considering keeping sight of his ex-partner's feelings. Instead of just breaking up, he tries to preserve a kind of friendship with her. In his effort to shape a balanced transition, he shows his ability to care for

himself and strives for autonomy while not losing touch with the feelings of others at the same time.

4.3 “I believe a little in karma” – Changed Structures of Intergenerational Reciprocity

In the third interview in the summer of 2016, *Noah* provides deeper insights into his familial constellations during childhood. His parents separated early when he was three years old, and his grandmother was his continuous caregiver:

For me as a little boy, it was clearly recognizable that my grandma, despite everything that had happened, remained impartial and was always around. When I lived at my father's place, I always saw my grandma. When I lived with my mother, I also saw my grandma. She was always around. (III)

It is quite obvious that the grandmother gave *Noah* an early feeling of stable security in turbulent times. Later, when *Noah* had gone astray, she did not reproach him as his father did, but he felt her worries and anxieties. Meanwhile, she lives in a retirement home because she could not live on her own any more. *Noah* now cares to her needs, provides her with the things she requires, and manages her personal finances. Although he does this with love and pleasure, the circumstances that got him into this responsibility were not of his own choosing. Shortly after his grandmother had moved to the retirement home, his father and stepmother (who had been living in a house with her) decided to emigrate to southern Europe because life in Switzerland became too expensive for them. All this had happened over the last one and a half years and changed the structures of intergenerational reciprocity in the family recognizably. One main point is *Noah*'s detachment process from his parents that has been advanced further by their geographical distance. Another point is that their financial situation remained the same, despite having moved to another country. *Noah* once had to lend them money in an urgent situation, and he still sends them necessities from time to time. He now is in a situation where he is the addressee for support in the family, and he has arranged himself with that responsibility. With respect to the previously often conflict-laden dynamics of familial working on relationships, he has gained the needful orientation framework to steer this development into a proper lane. On the question how he evaluates this change of roles, he answers:

Perhaps it's a bit unconscious and is linked to kind of guilt feelings that I have a guilty conscience: I have to help them. [...] I believe a little in karma: They've done good to me, I do good to them, and so, there will be something good in return from the other side. (III)

In this sequence, *Noah* presents his thoughts on the origins of family solidarity and the respective resulting duties for him. In his idea of the intergenerational linkage, he builds upon the spiritual concept of karma that emphasizes the direct connection between action and reaction. Regarding his early biographical experiences, he can

set up a coherent order of mutual responsibilities, which gains an obligatory character. Creating this closed loop serves as a source of sense-making which has the potential to further stabilize his self-concept as a caring generative other – a process accompanied and traversed by ambivalences and conflicts that must be brought into balance by the subject time and again. The former delinquent behavior sorts ill with this development, as *Noah* shows when talking about his motives to move out from the flat he shared with a friend:

He began screwing things up, did drugs and stuff, and so I said straight out: “Look, leave me alone with this, and most of all leave our housing situation in peace.” I didn’t want to lose control because of this – so rather sooner before it’s too late. (III)

Noah does not want to risk the life he established over the last years. Now he has his own flat and a stable relationship with his new girlfriend whom he met about a year ago. He still likes his job and keeps searching for an acceptable extra occupational arrangement so as to achieve his goal to become a trainee teacher in a measure like the one he has been in.

5. Conclusion: Biographical Analysis of Generative Development

Taken together, the biographical accounts of *Noah Wyss* provide insights into a lengthy development of one’s own generative stance. When working on this topic by just using content analysis, there would have been the risk to restrict the focus on the part where *Noah* talks about his desire to become an instructor himself. In combination with a longitudinal study design, the biographical analysis seems to be more adequate to get to the origins and ambivalent dynamics of this process.

In the time before *Noah* had been committed to the *Massnahmzentrum*, one can see the initial formation of the desire to become generative. Starting from the conflicts with his father and during his first partnership, the time in youth custody was marked by negative experiences with a generational other. These negative experiences served as a background through which he could dissociate himself from certain behaviors that do not fit his generative self-concept and through which he could work on further positioning himself.

It comes into view that this process is far from a linear pathway when the relationship with his girlfriend breaks up. But he refrains from letting go of his generative desire by caring for children in an internship during this intermediary phase. The point is that when he is committed to the *Massnahmzentrum*, he goes there with a certain amount of generative resources that also arose out of the continuous caring relationship he was provided with by his grandmother in childhood. There, he not only finds structures that allow him to build on his desire, but his proactive attitude also becomes visible, which seems to be a necessary condition. Not only do the structures

just work on him, but he also works on the structures. As he states himself, he had “to fight” for his generative desires, which points to the potential of this process for conflicts. The “second chance” of adolescence allows for obtaining a reflexive perspective to rework and reinforce his identification as a generative person.

With the longitudinal study design, we can see that *Noah's* generative desires were weakened temporarily but did not disappear. Moreover, the changed familial constellation due to the emigration of his parents and his care-dependent grandmother urged him to handle the associated ambivalences and to bring about a new balance. Therefore, the overall process seems to be sustainable instead of just being the manifestation of a coping strategy for getting through the measure.

A biographical perspective can shed light on the difference between the desire of becoming generative and the challenging realization of that task. Other participants in our study also delivered narrative accounts that entail concrete desires to become generative, but they did not succeed in implementing and stabilizing this intention. Therefore, the isolated glance on a narrative account at one time may be misleading. In the ongoing analysis of our data, we will further work out those differences.

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